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AUTHOR Buike, Sandra
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to provide an understanding of teacher decision making as it shaped the course of reading instruction. Specifically, through an analytical description of the patterns of teacher decision making, the study sought to identify and classify the decisions four teachers made and to describe how those decisions were reflected in their teaching. The four teachers selected taught first, second, or third grade and were solely responsible for the reading instruction in their classrooms. In addition, they used materials that allowed teacher decision making to occur. Analysis of teacher interview statements and classroom observation data revealed that teachers do make decisions and that those decisions can be classified according to preactive, interactive, and postactive or evaluative phases of teaching. Teachers made decisions concerning testing, grouping, materials, and classroom management. A close examination of the decision categories showed that teachers' major decisions concerned materials and that there was a conspicuous lack of decisions concerning instruction. The findings suggest that teacher education programs in reading instruction should not only instruct teachers how to teach reading, but how to think about it as well. (Author/FL)

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TEACHER DECISION MAKING IN READING INSTRUCTION

Sandra Buike

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TEACHER DECISION MAKING IN READING INSTRUCTION[1]

Sandra Buike[2]

Questions concerning the reading instruction provided to students are of interest to educators, researchers, parents, and students (Durkin, 1979). Generally, the teacher is solely responsible for the reading instruction planned for and presented to students. Because of this, it appears worthwhile to investigate the following questions: (1) How does a teacher decide what a program of reading instruction will consist of? and (2) Why does a teacher make a particular set of decisions concerning reading instruction?

The notion of the teacher as decision maker has been the focus of much recent research. Many researchers believe that a teacher's mental life and decision making skills are significant variables influencing instructional effectiveness (Clark & Yinger, 1978; Shulman, 1975; Shulman & Elstein, 1975). Some even go so far as to say that decision making is the most important teaching skill (Shavelson, 1973).

Within the context of reading instruction, which usually takes place in reading groups, it is possible to view the teacher as a decision maker who is "constantly assessing the situation, processing information about the situation, making decisions about what to do next, guiding action on the basis of these decisions, and observing the effects of these actions on students" (Clark, Note 1, p. 3). While research in the area of teacher thinking is "expected to lead to understandings of the uniquely human processes that guide and determine teacher behavior" (Clark & Yinger, 1977, p. 279), the underlying teacher decision making responsible for shaping the course of reading instruction remains virtually unknown to researchers.

Investigation of teacher thinking and decision making has been the focus of the IRT Conceptions of Reading Project. For almost three years,

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[1]Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, 1980.

[2]Sandra Buike is a research intern with the Conceptions of Reading Project.

members of the Conceptions of Reading research team have studied elementary classrooms. Twenty-three classroom teachers have participated in the study, designed to determine how teachers conceptualize the teaching of reading and whether these conceptions of reading influence instructional practice (Buike & Duffy, Note 2).

Classroom observations revealed the reading group to be an important instructional setting. The notions that (1) little is known about the teacher as decision maker operating within the context of the reading group, and (2) little is known about the consequences of teachers' decisions for the instruction of students in particular groups, provided the basis for the study reported in this paper.

The definition of the term decision, for the purposes of this study, reflects the work of several researchers (Shavelson, 1976; Morine, Note 3; Yinger, Note 4). Decision is defined here as the stated or inferred thought behind an observed teacher activity or utterance.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to provide an understanding of teacher decision making as it shaped the course of reading instruction in four classrooms. Specifically, through analytical description (McCall & Simmons, 1969) of the patterns of teacher decision making, the study proposed to identify and classify the decisions four teachers made and describe how those decisions were reflected in their reading instruction.

Methodology

The four teachers selected for this study were chosen from among the 23 teachers studied as part of the on-going Conceptions of Reading research project. During the 1977-78 academic year, 10 teachers were selected by nomination and on the basis of data obtained from instruments and inter-

views.[3] During the 1978-79 academic year, 13 teachers were selected on the basis of the types of schools they represented and their reported practices in reading.[4]

The four teachers selected taught first, second, or third grade. They were solely responsible for the reading instruction in their classrooms, and they used materials that allowed teacher decision making to occur.

It is from sifting through and discovering (1) what teachers say and researchers observe about the "hows and whys" of teacher decisions, and (2) actual classroom practice that makes it possible to understand teacher decision making and classroom instruction. The method used identified patterns of teacher decision making and action as well as describing how these decisions appeared to shape the course of reading instruction.

Using participant observation, data were collected four times during the school year in both the 1977-78 and 1978-79 academic years. The first cycle of data was collected in September, the second in November - December, the third in February, and the final cycle in May. Classrooms were observed three to five half days and one full day per cycle. Interview materials were collected before and after school during each cycle.

The activities, sights, sounds, and feelings of the classroom were recorded in field notes and audio recordings of reading groups, and recordings were made of teacher interviews. Maps of the room, and samples of the children's work were also collected. These materials served as the data base for subsequent analysis.

The data were analyzed according to a three-stage qualitative process. First, the interview data were analyzed to identify and classify decisions

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[3]The data collection techniques were a Propositional Inventory (Duffy & Metheny, Note 5) and a structured interview based on a variation of Kelly's Role Concept Repetory Test (Johnston, Note 6).

[4]The type of school was determined by both Michigan State Education Department data regarding socioeconomic status and by school district policy regarding the presence or absence of instructional/curricular mandates. Teacher practices were determined by responses to the Propositional Inventory and by interview.

which the teachers stated they made and which appeared to shape their reading instruction. Secondly, the field notes were analyzed to identify and classify the instructional practices observed when the teachers studied were involved in reading instruction. Finally, the decisions and instructional practices were compared in order to infer how teacher decision making influences reading instruction (Buike & Duffy, Note 2).

Integral to the analysis of the data was Denzin (1970, 1978) principle of triangualtion. Observation data were used to validate and corroborate inferences drawn from the interviews. In the same way, the interview data served to substantiate findings inferred from the observational data.

In addition, since the data to be analyzed were collected with actual reading groups, it was expected that the "way of life" in high and low reading groups could be inferred from the data and reported descriptively in the study.

Major Findings

Teacher interview statements, excerpts from field notes and other data are presented to illustrate the major findings. Since it is impossible to present all of the data, a few examples, representative of the teachers studied, are presented.

Teachers Do Make Decisions

It is clear that the four teachers studied did make decisions. Further, it is possible to identify the decisions they made and classify them according to preactive, interactive, and postactive or evaluative phases of teaching (Shavelson, 1976, p. 392). For the purposes of this study, these terms are used to describe a particular time of the school year (see Figure 1). A preactive or planning phase appeared to take place during the first month of school for each of the teachers studied. Following this

Preactive, Planning Phase	Interactive Phase	Postactive or Evaluative Phase
September - October	October - May	May - June
"Teacher as thinker, Planner and decision maker."	"Teacher as technician."	"Teacher as evaluator."
Decision Categories 1. Testing Decisions 2. Grouping Decisions 3. Materials Decisions 4. Management Decisions	Phase characterized by: 1. Implementation of Preactive Phase decisions 2. Modification of Preactive Phase decisions	Phase characterized by: 1. Evaluation of student performance and activity usage based on Preactive Phase decisions

Figure 1: Overview of Decision Findings

phase, evidence from classroom observations revealed that the teachers' reading programs were underway; this was the interactive or instructing phase. It typically began early in October and continued into spring. A final decision-making phase was identified in the last two months of the school year. This phase of teaching is the postactive or evaluative phase.

The majority of decisions made by the teachers in this study occurred in the first month of school, or within the preactive phase. In fact, the patterns of decisions identified during the interactive or instructing phase were actually preactive decisions that were implemented and modified in the interactive phase. In the same way, the postactive or evaluative phase was not characterized by any new categories of decisions. Rather, teachers in this phase tended to evaluate their performance, student performance, and activity selection based on the decisions they had made during the preactive phase.

Further analysis of the data provided illustrations that could be characterized as the role of the teacher during each phase. It appeared that the teacher role during the preactive phase could be viewed as, "teacher as thinker, planner, and decision maker." Evidence from the analysis of the data collected during the interactive phase indicated the teacher role could be summarized as "teacher as technician." In the final phase, evidence supported the "teacher as evaluator" role.

Preactive Phase--The Teacher as Thinker, Planner, and Decision Maker

The preactive or planning phase is characterized as a "reflective, thoughtful time" (Shavelson, 1976, p. 392). One teacher summarized this phase well when she stated, "I think I probably do a lot of thinking about what's going to happen before the kids get here." Teachers use information they've collected about their new students to plan the various aspects of their programs for the school year. The program plans also include their

goals for the year and reflections upon past programs.

Goals expressed during this phase were generally vague in nature. Teachers made statements like, "My goal is to get children reading" or "I want them to be able to read by the end of the school year." "Getting children to learn reading is an enjoyable and pleasurable activity," was also expressed. One teacher's goal was "to advance them from where they are, for them to make progress." Specific instructional goals or teaching objectives were not mentioned in this phase by any of the teachers studied.

During this phase, the teachers also reflected upon previous reading programs. Generally, the reading programs remained the same from year to year for each of the teachers studied. "My program doesn't change drastically from year to year." stated one teacher. "In fact," stated another, "my program has stayed basically the same through the years." One teacher provided a nice contrast by stating, "We, a group of teachers in the building, were really bored -- everything was too much the same. We needed to pick out new materials for this year's program -- we sorta needed a shot in the arm."

These general statements about goals and program conceptualization appeared to serve as a framework upon which the teachers made their program planning decisions. Evidence from the interview and observational data revealed that four major groups of decisions could be identified during this planning phase for all of the teachers studied: testing decisions, grouping decisions, materials decisions, and management decisions.

Testing Decisions. All four of the teachers made the decision to test students early in the school year. While the tests used varied from teacher to teacher, testing generally consisted of an evaluation of sight words, oral reading, and general reading skill abilities. In the study, one teacher com-

pleted her testing of students within the first week of school in September. Another teacher was still testing in the first week of October. Generally, however, by the third week of school, the teachers' testing procedures were completed and formal reading programs were in operation.

Grouping decisions. The category of grouping decisions stems from the decisions teachers made as a result of the information the tests yielded. All four teachers used the results of tests to make a general statement about a student's instructional reading level. Considering this level, the teachers then selected a basal textbook that was appropriate for the student's demonstrated instructional level. Membership in a particular group evolved as a result of the basal text a student was placed in.

Two of the four teachers studied formed skill groups in addition to their basal groups. The evidence from the test results indicated specific reading skill strengths and weaknesses of students. Membership in a particular skill group evolved from the skill deficiencies the teachers identified from testing. The teachers stated the children in the skills group "needed" to be taught these specific skills during the school year.

Materials decisions. Decisions made concerning selection of reading program materials tended to be "old" decisions. That is, each of the four teachers studied were experienced, and they used textbook materials they had used in their previous years of teaching. "A good teacher's guide" was reported by all teachers as the single most important factor they considered when making the decision about which textbook series to use.

The two teachers using a skills monitoring system in addition to their basal program, stated that their decision to use the material was based on a feeling that basal series were "not complete enough" as far as skill development was concerned. One teacher stated that the program provided

"good organization and direction for teaching specific reading skills."

Within this category of materials decisions, the teachers also made decisions about a variety of supplementary materials. While the basal programs served as the core of their reading programs, they selected supplementary materials to incorporate into the program later in the school year.

Management decisions. Management decisions during the preactive phase surfaced as organizational techniques designed to get the routine of the classroom established. Seating arrangements, social rules of the classroom, knowing where to put lunch money and find supplies, and knowing how the centers work were expressed by teachers as being important items of organizational knowledge for students. In general, the organizational techniques described by teachers and observed in their practice were designed for students to understand how the classroom was going to work during the school year. Management decisions, however, tended to be pervasive in all of the decision categories. For example, in order for a teacher to test a small group of children or individuals, the teacher had to make decisions concerning the management of the rest of the class and/or for the management of the small groups or individuals once their testing sessions had ended.

Management concerns also influenced grouping decisions. The very nature of grouping comes about from the four teachers' desire to manage a program for 25 to 30 students. As one teacher stated, "I think that given the fact that you've got 25 kids, grouping is a definite convenient way to handle instruction." The number of children in a group was also a concern for the teachers. One stated, "If I've got a whole bunch of students reading on the same level, chances are I'm still going to make two groups simply for ease of management."

Decisions about materials were influenced by the teachers' general concern for classroom management. All four teachers used a basal-textbook

program as the core of their reading programs. One teacher said she used a basal reader as a matter of convenience. She stated, "As a matter of convenience, I think probably you need a basal reader because -- well, maybe I'm just not talented enough -- but I can't see how, given the length of the school day and the number of activities there are to handle, and the number of programs the kids are involved in, and the lack of help for record keeping, you can keep track of skills, comprehension, and everything else on a completely individualized program. I think maybe if you had few enough kids, that would work. But, I think as a matter of convenience, you need that basal reader." She also stated that it served as a means of organization. Another teacher reported that basals gave her a sense of direction and structure.

Interactive Phase -- The Teacher as Technician

The interactive phase of teaching is defined as the period of time "when the teacher is interacting with students" (Shavelson, 1976, p. 396). This phase appeared to begin in October and last well into the spring. Analysis of the data collected during this phase did not reveal any new categories of teacher decisions. Rather, this phase was characterized by the implementation and modification of the decisions teachers made in the preactive or planning stage.

Implementation of the preactive decisions resulted in the establishment of a consistent, routine pattern of daily organization. Generally, the morning was composed of a series of events. The headings "Morning Business." "Assignment Giving," "Reading Groups," "Recess," and "Reading and Other Subjects" summarize the major events of the morning.

Within the organization of a typical morning, the reading groups emerged as the setting used by teachers for reading instruction. All four teachers relied exclusively on the teacher's guide of the basal series to direct the

flow of activities during reading group sessions. As one teacher stated, "Reading plans are done pretty much for the entire book. I keep them on a master plan and changes depend on the children; if something is too hard we might need another day, but usually we just move along with the book."

Suggestions found in the teacher's guide established the events that made up the format or structure of a reading group session. However, there was little evidence indicating that instruction occured during group time. Teachers appeared to simply pilot students through a progression of materials, and instruction came in the form of the teachers reading the directions for a workbook page or ditto sheet.

During the many hours spent in the classroom observing reading groups, it became apparent that the experience of learning to read is qualitatively different for high and low readers. Three of the four teachers stated they spent more time in group situations with their low readers. Observations substantiated this finding. However, closer examination of the data revealed that "more time" did not necessarily mean more instructional time. Management problems associated with low readers often prolonged a reading group session.

Teacher role, instructional strategy employed, and teacher attitude contributed to the general difference in the quality of instruction in high and low groups. As one teacher stated, "Ok, with the high group it's much more relaxed in terms of I don't feel like I have to keep pulling them to keep their minds on the books. It's more of a discussion exchange type thing between the high group and myself. It's more a part of their learning, a kind of working together to help them learn. With the lowest group, I'm more of a leader, a puller -- "let's pay attention" -- a director. I'll bet if you looked at my body I'd even be stiffer, more rigid with that group. Because if I let down and relax at all, then they relax and their attention span goes down. They need to feel me as a real strong figure."

Students in the low group were observed spending the majority of their seatwork time completing workbook pages, dittos, and boardwork assignments. The activities designed for these students focused on alphabet letters, word recognition, and vowel rules. This skill work tended to be introduced and practiced in isolation from the context of sentences, paragraphs, or stories. Students in the high group were observed spending the majority of their seatwork time reading and working on skills within the context of sentences, paragraphs, and whole stories. Better readers spent more time than low readers working in extra activity centers, going to the library, and playing reading and math related games.

For some teachers, a student's group placement was questioned. For these teachers, the grouping decision made in the preactive phase was modified. During the interactive phase, in a few cases, teachers were observed changing a student's group placement if the materials assigned for a particular group's work appeared "too hard or too easy" for a student. Statements like, "he really caught on" or "the student's self concept needed a boost" were expressed as reason to alter the preactive grouping decision. Generally, this appeared to be the only preactive decision teachers modified in the interactive phase.

The combination of the routineness of the classrooms and the fact that most of the teachers appeared to "pilot" students through materials led to the portrayal of the "teacher as technician" in this phase. One teacher's statement seemed to aptly summarize the tone of this phase. She stated, "I feel like when I walk in the classroom in the morning everything is well organized and its just a matter of here we go!"

Postactive or Evaluative Phase -- The Teacher as Evaluator

The postactive or evaluative phase involves the teacher reflecting upon the school year and "judging the worth of prior decisions" (Shavelson,

1976, p. 401). This phase occurred at the end of the school year. Major decisions during this phase were not identified. Rather, this phase involved evaluation of or reflection on decisions made during the preactive phase. Teachers evaluated both student progress and the success or failure of the activities that comprised their reading programs.

"Having students ready for the next year's teacher" was a concern expressed by the teachers at this stage of the study. The "teacher as evaluator" in this phase described student progress in terms of how many books a student completed during the school year. This measure was used to decide if a student was ready to be placed in the next grade level.

Teachers stated that the reading program was responsible for the students who did well. For those students who did not perform well, factors such as learning disabilities, home problems, bad background, low motivation, emotional problems, and the lack of proper eyeglasses were expressed as reasons contributing to low levels of performance.

In terms of daily or weekly evaluation of student progress, workbook pages, ditto sheets, contract assignments, and assorted boardwork lessons were completed by students and corrected or evaluated by the teachers. However, rarely were any of the four teachers observed using poor performance on these activities as a basis for reteaching.

Conclusions About Teacher Decision Making

Teachers do make decisions. It was possible to identify categories of testing decisions, grouping decisions, materials decisions, and management decisions. However, close examination of the decision categories led to the conclusion that teachers' major decisions concern materials. Conspicuously lacking is evidence of instructional decision making, that is, teachers making decisions about instruction based on instructional objectives.

Only in the cases of two of the teachers using a skills management system was there evidence of planning instruction for students based on prior stated instructional objectives. But even for these two teachers, the core of their reading program, like that of the other teachers studied, relied on the use of materials where the decision concerning what was to be learned by students and when was it to be learned was left to the publishers of commercial materials. Alternative teaching acts or methods were not found to be employed by the teachers, and, therefore, provided little evidence that teachers make decisions based on a rational model of decision making.

The way of life in high and low reading groups inferred from the evidence leads to speculation about the impact of the apparent lack of instructional decision making. The reading programs we observed for low readers focused on getting students to become "good decoders," in the belief that they would then be able to read. However, teachers consistently reported that their high readers were generally "lousy decoders." This fact did not concern them in relation to their high readers, and did not lead them to reevaluate their program for poor readers.

This study has implications for teacher educators and suggests avenues for further research. It appears that teacher educators need to go beyond teaching teachers how to test students and plan activities. Teacher decision making, if it is to lead to instructional effectiveness, should be emphasized. Programs of reading instruction would do well not only to teach teachers how to teach reading, but how to think about it as well.

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